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ABSTRACT

A special education teacher recounts her own experiences of burnout, suggests a 5 stage progression for the condition, and lists 12 ways of managing the problem. Among possible solutions are keeping a journal to look at situations more objectively, creating a support system at school, getting involved in inservice, taking mental health days, and reflecting on the reasons for entering the profession. (CL)

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TEACHER BURNOUT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

THE PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE OF A CLASSROOM TEACHER

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TEACHER BURNOUT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION
THE PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE OF A CLASSROOM TEACHER

There are many ways to describe teacher burnout, but it basically means feeling locked into a routine which can result in physical, emotional, and attitudinal exhaustion. Pines (1979), a University of California social psychologist, sees burnout beginning as a feeling of uneasiness which may climax into minor physical maladies, such as colds, and headaches, or left uncared for, into ulcers, colitis, or loss of appetite. Personally speaking, teacher burnout was a change in my feelings about teaching --- that it became less enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding and more frustrating and emotionally draining.

One of the more difficult aspects of someone experiencing burnout is recognizing that there is a problem. I will attempt to highlight some of the experiences and feelings I have had in the last seven years as a special education teacher.

As I embarked into a new stage of my life, I was excited -- WOW, I've finally fulfilled my dreams -- I'm really a teacher. For years and years one plans a course of study, setting goals for the future. I had always wanted to teach, but until I actually started teaching, I was unaware of the fact that I might not like it, feel comfortable in the role, or be an effective communicator of information to youngsters. Fortunately, I did like my chosen career --- it was challenging, exciting and rewarding. I loved my students and I became more and more excited about the field of special education. I worked for additional credentials so that I could broaden my educational

background and training, and keep abreast of changes in the field of special education. Completing a Master's degree was one of the highlights of my life - I was really proud--Not only was I doing a good job as a teacher of orthopaedically handicapped children, but I was growing professionally in my understanding of exceptionalities, as I continued along a path of goals I had set for myself. I was able to check off that I could do anything well I set my mind on. I didn't seem to mind taking more and more responsibilities at work -- Student Council Advisor; Curriculum Materials Person; Keeper of the instructional materials; Inservicing the staff on new laws, forms, and instructional materials and programs; Making obsolete those materials and strategies that were outdate. Meeting resistance didn't bother me -- I was willing to try new things, whether it was teaching techniques or instructional programs. Parents -- parents were crying for help so I decided to start a parent study group so parents of special education students could air their concerns and ask questions that they had had for years but never felt comfortable ventilating. A yearbook -- all children like to see themselves in school activities, SO Leslie and another teacher started a yearbook. The list goes on and on, whether one looks at the changes made in my own classroom, or those new experiences and situations that I created for my school population. What finally developed was "circuit overload;" a result of unacknowledged stress and demands that the educational environment I lived in brought out.

One morning I woke up and said, "Oh, it's only Tuesday,

that means I have four more days to get through." I was losing motivation, having less patience with my students, family, and peers, and not enjoying myself. However, I chose to consciously ignore these feelings of unhappiness, doubt and frustration. Could I really not like what I had spent so many years of training to become?

My immediate response was it was just a phase I was experiencing. I was becoming frustrated in much of the activities taken on at work and not at all excited about going to work. My personal needs, those intrinsic motivators that kept me going, as well as the challenges and rewards of the job, were not appearing frequently enough; not until I was approached about the possibility for participation on this panel to discuss Teacher Burnout in Special Education would I consciously admit what was happening. Only when personally confronted by a peer who I greatly admire and respect would I admit that I was Burning out - that I must acknowledge this as fact so I could help myself.

Kubler-Ross (1969) describes five stages that individuals experience as a part of death and dying. The relationship to these stages and my experiences with burnout are amazingly similar.

Kubler-Ross's Five Stages (1969)		Burnout Stages	
Stage 1:	Denial	Stage 1:	Recognizing the problem -- something is not working; the symptoms are there, yet you have failed to consciously acknowledge that something is happening. Acknowledging there is a problem -- could this really be happening to me? This is the time you are aware of a lower threshold of patience, loss of motivation and higher frustration, yet you are still not consciously choosing to admit it.
Stage 2:	Anger	Stage 2:	Denial -- this can't be happening to me. I've worked too hard to get this far professionally. Not only do you deny the fact that you are less effective in your teaching role, more easily frustrated, etc., but you also may become angry, usually at yourself; possibly at the people around you.
Stage 3:	Bargaining	Stage 3:	Bargaining - this is the time when you start to place qualifications on situations to get through a working day; "If John is not here, I know I'll make it through", or "If I can make it just till Wednesday, it's all downhill from there."
Stage 4:	Depression	Stage 4:	Depression -- this is the point when you begin to internalize the problem. Your really know something is wrong. You begin to feel sorry for yourself. Hopefully, you can work through this stage quickly.
Stage 5:	Acceptance	Stage 5:	This stage focuses on acceptance. You begin to start to try to work out the problem. You have accepted the fact that something is not working; it's time to consciously admit it and begin to cope with the situation, seeking out some remediation techniques.

I have made my own "STAGE 6" which I call the "Now What Stage?" What intervention techniques can one focus on to seek changes?! I have come up with a possible twelve remediation techniques.

1. The first technique might be to begin to keep a journal about your feelings---both your joys (which we tend to lose sight of), and the areas of stress. You can keep this in a log fashion, writing down the events of a day; this will document your experiences and you can choose to look at the situations a little more objectively as you put them on paper.

2. Create a support system at school. Find someone to eat lunch with each day, someone you can really share your feelings with. Concentrate on options and solutions; don't dwell on the negatives.

3. Arrange to get away on a retreat with your peers -- you'll soon realize you're not alone in your concerns.

4. Try to get involved in an inservice program that interests you. One of the greatest defenses against burnout is personal growth.

5. Change grade levels; new grade levels may present a good challenge as well as trying new and different curriculum and instructional materials. If possible, try to change school sites; sometimes the fact that you are with new professional peers will be the stimuli you need.

6. When you feel particularly depressed, take a day or two off. These are referred to as "Mental Health Days" and should be used to pamper yourself. Too often teachers are made to feel that they have to lie by calling in sick rather than the legitimacy of a Mental Health Day. Stay at home and enjoy the quiet of your own home once your family leaves. Treat yourself to a fancy lunch; go out on a shopping spree. Do whatever it takes to relax yourself.

7. If you're getting sick, or catching a cold, stay at home. You don't have to drag in - you don't do the students any good, particularly those in Special Education. The greatest problem in Teacher Burnout is not, surprisingly enough, with the teacher. It's what happens to the students. If a teacher "turns off/burns out" and develops an "I don't care" attitude, the children will begin to develop this same "I don't care" approach to their learning and behavior. (Best, 1980).

8. If you can afford it, take a semester off. Get another job. You'll learn a great deal and welcome the return to the classroom. Don't be afraid to say you like something better than education - be willing to make the change.

9. Learn to decompress between school and home. You'd be surprised at the amount of energy you consume in rehasing your daily frustrations to the people at home. Keep home a place to enjoy. Share the good things that happen at school.

10. Reflect on the ideological reasons you went into the teaching profession. Remember the little cliches you've picked up through the years --- no matter how handicapped, retarded, or bad a student is, you can find at least one good thing about that student and build on it. --- Try and relate to these as goals for the future.

11. Give yourself time to do the things you enjoy outside of school --- skiing, cooking, golf, tennis, etc.

12. Finally, concentrate on dealing with the specifics that caused your burnout, remembering that there are certain things that cannot be changed and must be put in a workable perspective, such as the implications involved as a result of the passing of Public-Law 94-142. By confronting the specifics, you are no longer in the position of being helpless. You have now become an active participant in attempting to overcome the situation.

These steps are only a few of the stages/steps which might be identified and often they overlap. As in the process of accepting terminal illnes$s and impending death, until one comes to the fact that there is something not working, communication breaks down, both internally and with those around you. Not everyone will experience the specifics that I described today.

My final step - looking at the specifics - made me aware of the fact that I really did enjoy the challenges presented in my career. I have been able to take a semester off as a classroom teacher, and am once again excited about what I am professionally doing in my new position of Program Specialist,

Special Education, for the Office of The Superintendent of Los Angeles County Schools. Only by confronting a situation can any attempts at resolution take place. Teachers, as do other professionals, and all other things of need WEAR OUT. (Best, 1980). Only with proper care and maintenance do they last. Remember to take care of yourself, too.

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